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Schools Of Democracy: A Political History of the American Labor Movement

Clayton Sinyai

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Schools Of Democracy: A Political History of the American Labor Movement

Abstract

In this new political history of the labor movement, Clayton Sinyai examines the relationship between labor activism and the American democratic tradition. Sinyai shows how America's working people and union leaders debated the first questions of democratic theory—and in the process educated themselves about the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship.

In tracing the course of the American labor movement from the founding of the Knights of Labor in the 1870s to the 1968 presidential election and its aftermath, Sinyai explores the political dimensions of collective bargaining, the structures of unions and businesses, and labor's relationships with political parties and other social movements. *Schools of Democracy* analyzes how labor activists wrestled with fundamental aspects of political philosophy and the development of American democracy, including majority rule versus individual liberty, the rule of law, and the qualifications required of citizens of a democracy. Offering a balanced assessment of mainstream leaders of American labor, from Samuel Gompers to George Meany, and their radical critics, including the Socialists and the Industrial Workers of the World, Sinyai provides an unusual and refreshing perspective on American labor history.

Keywords

labor, labor movement, political dimension, American, economic, performance, policymaking, collective bargaining, employment, policy, liberty, democratic citizenship

Comments

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CLAYTON SINYAI

Washington, DC

INTRODUCTION

Democracy and the Worker, Past and Present

If you ask modern observers of American trade unions to explain organized labor's political principles and practice, you are likely to hear one of two answers. Which one you hear depends largely on the politics of your respondent. Both contain valuable insights—but they also reveal as much or more about their advocates as they do about the American labor movement.

Today's free-market ideologues tend to view trade unions with suspicion. Informed by the classical liberalism of John Locke and Adam Smith, they believe that the purpose of government is to secure the liberty of every individual to work out his own destiny, free of political coercion. They further believe that an economy is most productive when every individual is free to act according to his or her own best judgment and negotiate his or her own individual transactions, whether the individual be a producer looking to sell, a consumer looking to buy, an employer looking to hire (or fire), or an employee looking to find work (or quit a job).

In this view, labor unions, first and foremost, are *economic monopolies* in which groups of workers conspire to extract an excessive price for their labor, in much the same way that business monopolies conspire to extract an unjustified price from consumers. Indeed, free marketeers argue that these labor monopolies may be *more* dangerous than the conventional variety. After all, business corporations seeking to monopolize their market still face penalty of law. In contrast, American labor law does not only *exempt* trade unions from antitrust regulations, but the 1935 National Labor Relations Act actually commits the government to *help* unions protect their monopoly once a majority

of workers in a given establishment has voted to create one. Having acquired vital political interests, union leaders deploy their members' time and money in a drive for ever-increasing political power, becoming one of the most pernicious and persistent special interests of American society.¹

The social democrats and radicals who write much of today's labor history assume a very different perspective. Implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) adopting Karl Marx's understanding of politics and society, they generally share a belief that free-market capitalism is an economic system premised on the exploitation of labor; that politics is an instrument of class warfare; and that government is often little more than a tool of the ruling classes. They further believe that some broad economic and political transformation is necessary in order to make society more democratic, equal, free, and fair, and that labor has a key role to play in this transformation.

Looked at from this perspective—and especially in comparison with the deeply socialist labor movements of Europe—American trade unions on the whole have embraced a disappointing “business unionism.” Though radical rank-and-file revolt has periodically driven these unions to temporarily adopt broader goals, a “labor aristocracy,” uninterested in or even hostile to a radical social transformation, has usually captured their leadership. Content to seek better wages and benefits for a narrow segment of the nation's workers without upsetting the current economic order in any fundamental way, these leaders have failed even in this mission, as evidenced by today's declining union membership numbers.²

Both of these perspectives reveal important truths but leave an equally important story untold. Most of America's trade union members and leaders (like most Americans) are neither socialist radicals nor supply-side Republicans, and necessarily see what they are doing quite differently than either group. Neither of the two great contemporary ideological perspectives can do justice to one of the central and enduring political concerns of the American labor movement: educating working people for democratic citizenship.

Mechanic, Slave, or Citizen? From Athens to the Enlightenment

Few today would wish for “citizenship” in Josef Stalin's USSR or Saddam Hussein's Iraq, but it was at least a rather simple proposition: obey. Authoritarian regimes, in at least this sense, do not place many demands upon their citizens. Citizens need not be especially wise, or good, or self-disciplined, or exhibit any other special virtues. The “good citizen” is one who does what he is told.

Citizenship in a democratic republic is more complicated, because the responsibilities of rule fall upon the citizens themselves. The people are called upon to make intelligent and farsighted decisions about the welfare of their nation. Precisely *what* qualities the citizen needs to participate in self-rule, *who* has them, and *how* they may be acquired or lost are among the oldest questions in political philosophy. It has been the subject of a contentious and continuous debate from the time our Greek forbears gave us the term “democracy.”

While today we are tempted to evade these concerns as irrational elitism—as if *any* person could be unfit for self-government!—the workers, reformers, and activists who drove the labor movement in the United States accepted the challenge. Throughout the history of American labor, they have asked probing questions about the nature and qualifications of democratic citizenship. And they have made their various trade unions, labor parties, and worker organizations not just engines of economic betterment but of civic education: “schools of democracy” that would make America’s working people *worthy* of citizenship in a democratic republic. To understand the scope of the challenge, they turned—directly or indirectly—to the political ideas of their ancient and early American forbears. Before beginning the close examination of American labor activists’ words and deeds that will comprise the narrative of *Schools of Democracy*, it is fitting that we use this introduction for a brief review of the heritage that so influenced them and shaped their thought.

For the ancient Greeks, true democracy existed only when citizens *themselves* deliberated together to draw up the rules and principles by which they would live.³ People who merely elected leaders to deliberate *for* them in representative institutions were not full citizens in the true sense of the word. “The citizen in this strict sense is best defined by the one criterion, ‘a man who shares in the administration of justice and in holding of office,’” explained Aristotle. “The good citizen must possess the knowledge and capacity requisite for ruling as well as being ruled.” Furthermore, the purpose of politics was certainly *not* to find out what the people wanted and give it to them. It was to secure moral excellence and the common good. According to the Philosopher, “The main concern of politics is to engender a certain character in the citizens and to make them good and disposed to perform noble actions.”⁴ Given such demanding political ideals, could those who spent their days in manual labor meet the demands of political participation? Not merely to vote, but to hold office and contribute to public deliberations with valuable insights into the commonweal?

Many Greek commentators found reason to doubt it. Aristotle himself divided society between a private, household sphere where bodily needs were

met (the “*oikos*,” the origin of our term “economics”) and a public arena where common affairs were conducted (the “*polis*,” from which “politics” is derived). He also imagined two corresponding polar opposites in the human race distinguished by their nature or character: the freeman or citizen, and the slave. The freeman (always, for Aristotle, a *man*) was rational and capable of education, independent judgment, and thus self-rule and citizenship. The slave was unreflective, a “living tool” or “animate instrument” lacking a capacity for reason and independent judgment and so suited only to follow directions. Their relationship was mutual and complementary, but based upon their fundamental differences. The ideal Aristotelian *polis* would have freemen participating as citizens in deliberations under the rule of law. Slaves would remain in the *oikos*, performing household labor under the command of a master, albeit command informed by a paternalistic concern.⁵

As legally free men pursuing “slavish” employment, workers seemed to occupy a shadowy zone between citizen and slave, partaking in certain characteristics of each. Aristotle sought to discern their civic potential by comparing them to his two polar classes—employing a remarkably subtle understanding of the division of labor and its consequences for these “mechanics.” “Occupations are divided into those which are fit for freemen and those which are unfit for them,” he explained.

The term “mechanical” should properly be applied to any occupation, art, or instruction, which is calculated to make the body, or soul, or mind of a freeman unfit for the pursuit and practice of goodness. We may accordingly apply the word “mechanical” to any art or craft which adversely affects men’s physical fitness, and to any employment which is pursued for the sake of gain and keeps men’s minds too much, and too meanly, occupied. . . . A good deal depends on the purpose for which acts are done or subjects are studied. Anything done to satisfy a personal need, or to help a friend, or to attain goodness, will not be illiberal; but the very same act, when done repeatedly at the instance of other persons, may be counted menial and servile.⁶

The difference between freeman and slave was not necessarily innate—here it was viewed as an effect of the division of labor rather than its cause. Labors that were repetitive and trivial, and that were performed under the command and direction of another, were degrading to a freeman. Such labors were not just dishonorable but literally degrading, for these actually corroded physical, intellectual, and civic virtues; if one were not already unfit for citizenship, one could be made so by pernicious conditions of work. And interestingly the pursuit of “gain” was also unfitting for the freeman—seeking

wealth beyond some rather modest standard of material need was seen as unnatural and even vicious. Perhaps Aristotle would have felt that today's capitalist and worker *alike* had minds "too meanly occupied" to be good citizens. In any case, Aristotle believed that populations consisting largely of "mechanics, shopkeepers and day laborers" were poorly suited to democratic government.⁷

But unlike his teacher Plato, who seemed contemptuous of democratic institutions, Aristotle not only found valid arguments in favor of democracy but also an ideal political economy for cultivating it. "When the farming class and the class of moderate means are the sovereign power in the constitution, they conduct the government under the rule of law," he said. "There is thus no difficulty in constructing a democracy where the bulk of the people live by arable or pastoral farming." A community of what Americans would later call "yeoman farmers" offered several advantages to the statesman crafting a democratic order. Small farmers worked, to be sure; they were not a leisured and educated class. But unlike the day laborers, freehold farmers directed their own labor and routinely exercised independent judgment. Also unlike the day laborers or mechanics, freehold farmers held a small property of their own, giving them an enduring stake in the welfare of their community. Finally, a city composed of independent farmers was characterized by a rough equality of economic condition, with no vast differences in wealth to inflame partisan hostility, undermine a sense of the common good, debase deliberations and incite destructive civil wars.⁸

The opposite was true of societies in which propertyless workers outnumbered their social betters, and the statesman who attempted to build democracies out of such civic material was likely to fail. A good politics was directed toward a shared pursuit of the good life, not the needs and desires of the flesh that properly belonged to the privacy of the *oikos*—but how could the laboring classes, often desperately poor, resist the temptation to use government to pursue vulgar material needs?⁹

Similarly, a politics devoted to the *common* good was concerned with the shared good of the whole community, not just a portion of it, even if that portion were a majority. And like Publius in the famous *Federalist Paper #10*, Aristotle emphatically believed that the majority faction—easily confusing its own desires for the common good—posed a special danger of tyranny. "When popular decrees are sovereign instead of the law," he argued, the majority "grows despotic; flatterers come to be held in honor; it becomes analogous to the tyrannical form of single-person government. Both show a similar temper." (If this sounds hopelessly elitist, consider the Red Scare, the McCarthy

era, the Jim Crow South, or similar historical episodes.) The rule of law meant that the laws enjoined all impartially, permitting special pleading for none, neither privileged aristocrat nor majority party. But for Aristotle as for Publius, in a democratic republic the masses seemed even more disposed than the classes to abuse their political power.¹⁰

In short, the ancient writers did not hold workers to be promising civic material. Directed constantly by others, they lacked independent judgment; without property, they had no “stake” in the political community; their physical exigencies and their propensity to disregard the rule of law made them the weak link in any political order. They posed an especially attractive constituency for demagogues who aimed to overthrow constitutional government and establish tyrannical rule.

Time and time again, the Roman historians—whom the American founders would so closely study—seized upon this conventional wisdom to explain the decline of their own Republic.¹¹ With Rome’s conquests abroad, the virtuous freehold farmers who comprised the backbone of the republic were eclipsed and displaced by a grasping aristocracy, on the one hand, and a multitude of slaves and urban *proletarii* (or proletarians), on the other. “To one who aspires to power the poorest man is the most helpful, since he has no regard for his own property, having none, and considers anything honorable for which he receives pay,” Sallust wryly noted. Was it any surprise that the day came when popular favorites like Julius Caesar could topple Rome’s free institutions with the support of their troops, to the cheers of an urban mob? Or that the Caesars could cement their tyranny by offering no more than bread and circuses to the milling *proletarii*?¹²

Seventeen hundred years later, the Enlightenment would turn many of these ancient verities on their head, with pioneering English liberal John Locke, would exercising enormous influence over the shape of American political thought. Locke tried to explain politics by imagining the human condition preceding society and government, a “state of nature” in which every person enjoyed “a State of perfect Freedom” and “a State also of Equality.” By nature, every human being was free and independent of every other and had no obligations except those to which he or she consented.¹³

How did people in the state of nature spend their time? Not participating in politics, that’s for sure. Nor, it seems, were they pursuing philosophical reflections. “God gave the World to Men,” Locke explained, “for their benefit, and the greatest Conveniencies of Life they were capable to draw from it.”¹⁴ Men in the state of nature were busy laboring on the earth God had given them to acquire the greatest “Conveniencies of Life,” or consumption goods, that

they could extract from it. In so doing they were acquiring property, Locke explained with reference to his innovative Labor Theory of Value. Through a combination of this labor, and a free and uncoerced exchange of its products with others, each person in the state of nature acquired goods commensurate with the labor one exerted.¹⁵

From whence then did government and politics arise? However desirable man's natural freedom, one's liberty was "constantly exposed to the Invasion of others," Locke explained. Moreover, "enjoyment of the property he has in this state is very unsafe, very unsecure." Thus men gave up their natural freedom and came together in a social contract to create a government charged with protecting that liberty and property. Locke's account of the formation of government tells us a great deal about his attitude toward politics. The Greeks and Romans considered politics to be among the highest forms of human activity. Locke contended that government is merely a tool to protect individuals' freedom, in general, and their property, in particular.¹⁶

This attention to individual liberty would prove to be the signal contribution of English liberalism to political thought and an important heritage for its American admirers. In succeeding centuries, "liberal" thought on property would shift and change, but the primacy of individual liberty would remain axiomatic. It was a curious axiom, in an important sense an obstacle to democracy rather than a contribution to it. Liberty could be invoked by the citizen to defy a tyrant—but equally to defy democratic majorities. Furthermore, by promising citizens that they were free to live the life they chose, Locke's conception of liberty challenged the ancient concepts of civic virtue at their roots.

Locke's liberalism transformed both the idea of politics and the idea of democracy. By asking much less from politics and government than the ancient thinkers, Locke made possible a far more egalitarian, inclusive and open idea of democratic citizenship. Locke did not consider political participation a necessary component of the good life. He asked of government only that it protect the liberty and property of every citizen. Politics was a minimal affair where citizens need only appoint a government to keep the peace and thereafter keep that government under careful supervision.

With a politics so modest in its ambitions, the ancient philosophers' agonized reflections over each social class's ability to bear civic rights and responsibilities began to look absurd and elitist. The only skill the liberal citizen required was the ability to keep his word and honor the social contract; there was little justification for withholding the rights of citizenship from anyone. In fact, if all were free and equal in an original "state of nature," civic rights were probably not something one merited through intellectual or moral ca-

pacities at all, but entitlements nature awarded to all equally. Liberalism proposed a veritable revolution in the standards of republican citizenship.

Labor and Democratic Citizenship: The American Tradition

The founders and shapers of America's young republic—men like Thomas Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Abraham Lincoln—were conversant both in the texts of Greco-Roman antiquity and the contemporary innovations of British liberals. They appropriated freely from each of these traditions to craft a uniquely American corpus of political thought, creating the conventional wisdom with which American labor would think and act.

If American political philosophy has any single father it is Thomas Jefferson; any examination of democratic citizenship in America must begin with him. Jefferson blended the premises of classical and liberal political thought into a novel—and perhaps untenable—American synthesis.¹⁷ In the manner of the most progressive English liberals, he explained government as a sort of social contract, placed a primacy on individual liberty, called that government best which governed least, and embraced the *laissez-faire* economics of Adam Smith. Yet in language unambiguous enough to recall Aristotle or Cicero, Jefferson insisted that politics was something far nobler than a mere contract and judged the nation's new institutions according to their ability to create virtuous citizens. He married the liberal conviction in essential human equality to the ancient notion that humans achieve their highest end only in political participation. For good or ill, his principles permanently shaped the debate over American workers' fitness for democratic citizenship.

The ringing voice with which Jefferson affirmed in the *Declaration of Independence* that "all men are created equal" suggested an optimism about the average citizen's civic potential that most classical writers would have deemed excessive. Perhaps not excessive if, like his Federalist contemporaries, Jefferson had thought that elected leaders were enough to make a republic democratic, and voting the average citizen's only civic duty.¹⁸ But like the men of ancient Athens, he considered popular participation in government to be both the essence of any democratic politics and its only sure foundation. The citizen must be "a participator in the government of affairs, not merely at an election one day in a year, but every day; when there shall not be a man in the State who will not be a member of some one of its councils, great or small, he will let his heart be torn out of his body sooner than his power be wrested from him by a Caesar or a Bonaparte."¹⁹

The participatory democracy he cherished necessarily challenged his egalitarian sentiments, for Jefferson was asking much of his citizens. It was not enough that each vote “in an election one day a year,” for each had to also “be a member of one of its councils.” They could not be content to choose someone with enough wisdom, independence, and virtue to deliberate over the common good; they themselves needed enough wisdom, independence and virtue to engage in political deliberations. And that called for some hard thinking about who was up to the challenge. Like the ancient writers he prized, Jefferson decided that the yeoman farmer was equal to that challenge—and that the wage laborer probably was not.

“Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue,” Jefferson began in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark set upon those, who not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman, for their subsistence, depend for it on the casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. . . . [G]enerally speaking, the proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens bears in any state to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts, and is a good-enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption. While we have land to labor then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff. Carpenters, masons, smiths are wanting in husbandry: but for the general operations of manufacture, let our work-shops remain in Europe. It is better to carry provisions and materials to workmen there, than bring them to the provisions and materials, and with them their manners and principles. The loss by the transportation of commodities across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government. The mobs of the great cities add just so much strength to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.²⁰

Here Jefferson provides a rich summary of his thoughts on the worker as citizen. Labor did not *itself* prejudice the citizen's capabilities; he placed little stock in the idea shared by many ancient writers that a leisured and learned aristocracy produced the best politics. On the contrary, the self-reliant, industrious, and frugal yeomen “who labor on the earth” were the “peculiar de-

posit of substantial and genuine virtue” whose “manners and spirit” would “preserve a republic in vigor.”

Notably, Jefferson rated only “husbandmen”—and maybe the “carpenters, masons, smiths,” and other self-employed artisans who serviced them—as the “healthy parts” of the society; slaves and slavemasters, workers and capitalists apparently all numbered among the “unsound parts.” Small proprietors engaged their fellow citizens on the basis of equality, and were prepared to meet and deliberate with others as equals. Not so all these others, whose daily life taught them a lot about giving orders like masters or taking orders like servants but nothing about cooperating with peers. Discussing slavery, Jefferson—a slaveholder himself—exposed how such relations of command and obedience despoil the civic virtue of both parties to the unhealthy relationship. “The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other,” he contended. A practice “permitting one half the citizens to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, and these into enemies, destroys the morals of the one part, and the *amor patriae* of the other.”²¹

Jefferson’s rhetoric regarding wage laborers themselves recalls the Roman historians’ indictment of the *proletarii*. “The mobs of the great cities add just so much strength to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body.” This was because “dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition,” inviting the same kind of conspiracy between rich ambitious patrons and dependent clients that had deranged the Roman republic’s politics.

In sum, Jefferson was torn between two notions of citizenship. His democratic temperament led him to embrace Locke’s liberal premises. He was ready to assume that “all men are created equal” and that by nature they were entitled to equal rights—tendencies that led him toward an open and egalitarian civic standard. But he was also a careful student of his classical forbears. He understood that participatory democracy was demanding. Jeffersonian citizenship was hard work; it evoked strenuous and even exclusionary standards of civic virtue that obliged Jefferson to ask difficult questions about the workingman’s fitness for political life.

Curiously, the writer who explored the American worker’s qualifications for democratic citizenship most thoroughly during these years was a foreigner: Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville was convinced that history had fated a general equality of condition for the world, a development about which he him-

self had mixed feelings. But he also believed that Americans had made the most out of the new equality, while continental Europeans had secured many of its vices without its benefits. He visited America to investigate its political culture and practices, reporting his findings in *Democracy in America*.²²

Tocqueville was a particularly keen observer of America's robust practices of political participation. "It is hard to explain the place filled by political concerns in the life of an American. To take a hand in the government of his society and to talk about it is his most important business and, so to say, the only pleasure he knows," Tocqueville marveled. "If an American should be reduced to occupying himself with his own affairs, at that moment half his existence would be snatched from him; he would feel it as a vast void in his life and become incredibly unhappy."²³

Against the fears of the ancients and Federalists, Tocqueville found that this enthusiastic political participation by Americans of every class did not undermine stability, good order, and the rule of law. In fact it *strengthened* them by giving all the nation's citizens a remarkable, almost proprietary interest in nation's well-being. Perhaps even more importantly, Tocqueville saw that democracy was a social contract, but not necessarily Locke's contract to preserve maximum individual freedom. Rather, the contract awarded each person a voice in deliberations—on condition that he freely and conscientiously respect the majority's decision when deliberations were complete. This being so, direct political participation made honoring the rule of law a debt of honor for every citizen. "This popular origin, though often damaging to the wisdom and quality of legislation, gives it peculiar strength," the Frenchman observed. Under the terms of the implicit social contract, "every American feels a sort of personal interest in obeying the laws, for a man who is not today one of the majority party may be so tomorrow, and so he may soon be demanding for laws of his choosing that respect which he now professes for the lawgiver's will."²⁴

Conversely, this participatory political culture was a remarkable source of civic education. By participating in government at the local level, whether in a town meeting or a jury, the citizen learned the habits of deliberating, creating and obeying rules, and rising above private concerns to analyze the common good. Voluntary associations of all sorts nurtured these habits in every corner of American society. As in politics, so in civil, religious, social, economic, and moral fields, Tocqueville found that Americans disdained the action of a paternalistic state. Other peoples might look to the government to perform every public function, but Americans preferred to improvise voluntary associations. These associations were usually formed according to dem-

ocratic political principles—via deliberation, elected officers, and majority votes. Through them Americans preserved a spirit of self-reliance and practiced the skills necessary for political participation. “They thus learn to submit their own will to that of all the rest and make their own exertions subordinate to the common action, all things which are necessary to know, whether the association be political or civil. So one may think of political associations as great free schools to which all citizens come to be taught the general theory of association.”²⁵

These free schools, and the robust local democracy they supported, worked so well because of peculiar American social conditions. “I think there is no other country in the world where, proportionately to population, there are so few ignorant and so few learned individuals as in America. Primary education is within reach of all; higher education is hardly available to anybody.” This rough equality of mental condition conferred moral authority on democratic deliberations. With “few ignorant,” deliberations produced prudent public choices; with “few learned,” no social elite existed that could claim an expertise in political affairs that surpassed that of the majority. “In times of equality men . . . think it not unreasonable that, all having the same means of knowledge, truth will be found on the side of the majority.”²⁶

But the young industrial economy posed a danger, because it threatened the equality of mental condition that was the rational basis for democratic deliberations. Adam Smith had begun his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* by marveling how an intense division of labor had greatly multiplied the productivity of workers manufacturing “pins” (nails).²⁷ Tocqueville elaborated on that division of labor’s pernicious effects for democracy.

When a workman is constantly and exclusively engaged in making one object, he ends by performing this work with singular dexterity. But at the same time, he loses the general faculty of applying his mind to the way he is working. Every day he becomes more adroit and less industrious, and one may say that in his case the man is degraded as the workman improves. What is one to expect from a man who has spent twenty years of his life making heads for pins? And how can he employ that mighty human intelligence which has so often stirred the world, except in finding out the best way of making heads for pins? [. . .] Thus, at the same time that industrial science constantly lowers the standing of the working class, it raises that of the masters. While the workman confines his intelligence more and more to studying one single detail, the master daily embraces a vast field in his vision, and his mind expands as fast as the other’s contracts. Soon the latter will need no more than bodily strength without intelligence, while to succeed the former needs science and almost genius. . . . What is this, if not an aristocracy?²⁸

Like Plato and Aristotle, the French democratic theorist saw that hereditary class distinction was only a superficial expression of aristocracy; the essence of aristocracy was an inequality in intellect, talent or virtue that rendered democracy unreasonable. Democratic institutions had legitimate authority only insofar as majority deliberations expressed a wisdom superior to that of any elite. The more learned that elite became—and the more ignorant the majority—the less sense democratic procedures made. It seemed inevitable that the advancing industrial division of labor would make America steadily less hospitable for democracy.²⁹

The vibrant local institutions that Tocqueville saw in America inspired in him another train of thought that, though not expressly related the condition of labor, prefigured many of organized labor's future challenges. The Frenchman found that Americans did for themselves through associations of equals many of those things for which his countrymen turned to the state. Voluntary associations established public libraries, fire departments, and indeed every type of civic improvement one could imagine. An astonished Tocqueville explained to his readers how Americans, upon finding an obstacle blocking the roads, preferred to improvise an assembly of their neighbors, choose an executive and fix the problem themselves rather than calling on the authorities to do so.³⁰

Tocqueville thought this spirit of self-reliance essential to the preservation of American democracy—and a paternalistic state to be perhaps the greatest danger to republican institutions. For Tocqueville, democracy was virtually inseparable from local institutions of self-rule. Citizens could interact as peers with their fellows in a town meeting or a social club, but one necessarily approached an official of the state as a supplicant. It was certainly *easier* to delegate civic duties to an elected national government but this could not meaningfully be called “self-rule.”

It does little good to summon those very citizens who have been made so dependent on the central power to choose the representatives of that power from time to time. However important, this brief and occasional exercise of free will will not prevent them from gradually losing the faculty of thinking, feeling, and acting for themselves, so that they will slowly fall below the level of humanity. I must add that they will soon become incapable of using the one great privilege left to them. . . . It really is difficult to imagine how people who have entirely given up managing their own affairs could make a wise choice of who are to do that for them. One should never expect a liberal, energetic, and wise government to originate in the votes of a people of servants.³¹

Though Tocqueville was not thinking here about the working classes in particular, the problem he described would consume two generations of labor activists. When industrial capitalism advanced, while labor organizations struggled to survive, Samuel Gompers and his successors in the American Federation of Labor would continue to argue that only voluntary associations could foster workers worthy of citizenship. They argued—as Tocqueville would have—that a working class that accepted the government's paternal protection hopelessly compromised its civic virtue. Against such "voluntarists" a series of progressive opponents would argue that this principle was an archaic luxury that workers could ill afford. The motions of the market, they argued, were dooming an ever-greater portion of the working class to misery and oppression. Organized labor had the right and even the duty to call upon the government to intervene in the workplace on behalf of their class.

Indeed, already by mid-century the motions of the market were eclipsing America's old majority of freehold farmers. The yeomen were being displaced by two polar classes—capitalists and workers—with a great and growing chasm between them. Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson had argued that if government would but *treat* men equally, their natural and innate equality would shine forth, creating a happy republic of small proprietors.³² White men in America indeed obtained a general equality before the law in the course of the Jackson era, given that institutions such as indentured servitude and property qualifications for the franchise melted away. But this did not create the idyll of equal yeoman farmers and small shopkeepers that the Democracy had promised. Instead, citizens were sorting themselves into unequal classes with astonishing speed. The American conventional wisdom that "all men are created equal" seemed increasingly at odds with observed facts.

For defenders of Southern slavery, these developments merely confirmed the obvious. The most trenchant of these Southern defenders was George Fitzhugh, who laid out his case in *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves without Masters*. With frequent reference to Aristotle, Fitzhugh argued that *inequality*, not equality, was the human condition. "The order and subordination observable in the physical, animal, and human world show that some are formed for higher, others for lower stations—the few to command, the many to obey." For Fitzhugh this was the nub of the matter. "Capital commands labor, as the master does the slave," he argued. Southern slaveholder or Northern capitalist, they were "cannibals all," engaged in the same enterprise of living off the labor of others. But to the capitalist, Fitzhugh said, "You, with the command over labor which your capital gives you, are a slave owner—a master, without the obligations of a master. They who work for you, who create your in-

come, are slaves, without the rights of slaves. Slaves without a master!" Workers, whether white or black, were not entitled for the rights of citizenship—they were entitled to the paternal care of a master!

We conclude that about nineteen out of every twenty individuals have "a natural and inalienable right" to be taken care of and protected, to have guardians, trustees, husbands, or masters; in other words, they have a natural and inalienable right to be slaves. The one in twenty are as clearly born or educated or some way fitted for command or liberty. Not to make them rulers or masters is as great a violation of natural right as not to make slaves of the mass.³³

Fitzhugh proposed an utter rejection of American democratic principles. Pious Jeffersonian claptrap about how our special conditions could give every American the independence, predispositions, and civic skills for self-rule, enabling universal participation in politics, had been shown up by history. Human beings were fundamentally unequal; a free market had not produced equality but widening extremes of wealth and poverty; it was a license for the rich and clever to rob the poor and stupid. Ninety-five percent of human beings were congenitally incapable for self-rule. The American experiment had failed.

Interestingly, antislavery politicians like Abraham Lincoln did not so much defend the system of wage labor as they denied it. "In these Free States, a large majority are neither *hirers* nor *hired*. Men, with their families—wives, sons and daughters—work for themselves, on their farms, in their houses and in their shops, taking the whole product to themselves, and asking no favors of capital on the one hand, nor of hirelings or slaves on the other." For Lincoln even wage labor was not genuinely "Free Labor." Wherever one man labored for another, even by free contract, a separation of mental and manual labor followed that would poison the civic capacities of the working classes.

A Yankee who could invent a strong *handed* man without a head would receive the everlasting gratitude of the [slavery] advocates. But Free Labor says "no!" Free Labor argues that, as the Author of man makes every individual with one head and one pair of hands, it was probably intended that heads and hands should cooperate as friends; and that that particular head, should direct and control that particular pair of hands . . . and that being so, every head should be cultivated, and improved, by whatever will add to its capacity for performing its charge.³⁴

If Northern labor could be characterized as "free," it was not because wage labor was an honorable station but because it was a transitional one, experi-

enced as men worked toward the true liberty of self-employment.³⁵ Like Aristotle and Fitzhugh, Lincoln believed that the “living instrument,” the strong *handed* man directed by the head of another, bore the nature of a slave—in other words, that despite their profound differences, the wage slave and the chattel slave shared a fundamental similarity of condition. Unlike Fitzhugh and Aristotle, however, Lincoln was certain the average person was fit for much more. Still, despite his insistence that the “large majority” in the North remained self-employed, the famous words of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural seem curiously confessional. “It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces; but let us not judge that we be not judged.”³⁶

The labor movement received another interesting inheritance from the Civil War era: an enduring association of the term “Union” with democracy itself. This association was no linguistic accident. “The seceders insist that our Constitution admits of secession,” Lincoln began, explaining their political fallacy to the Congress. “To be consistent they must secede from one another, whenever they find it the easiest way of settling their debts, or effecting any other selfish, or unjust object. The principle itself is one of disintegration, and upon which no government can possibly endure.”³⁷

The structure of this argument should be familiar to labor, for it is the same one used by twentieth-century labor activists to justify the union shop as a democratic institution.³⁸ As Tocqueville and Lincoln sensed, democracy is at root a rather simple bargain. The citizen receives a share or voice in making group decisions, and in exchange agrees to honor the group decision when the deliberations are over. Democracy is not possible when individual citizens reserve the right to withdraw and refuse obedience whenever they dissent from the collective decision—“the principle itself is one of disintegration.” It is also the principle of the free market.

1

SCHOOLS OF DEMOCRACY AND INDEPENDENCE

*The Labor Movement and
the Democratic Republic*

In the era preceding industrialization, figures like Thomas Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Abraham Lincoln argued that only a high standard of civic virtue could sustain a democratic republic. They also tended to believe that only a community of small proprietors, sharing a rough equality of mental and material conditions, could preserve that level of civic virtue, and that vibrant local institutions of self-rule were necessary to nurture it. For Americans who treasured these precepts, Gilded Age America was filled with menacing signs. The egalitarian political economy that had made America uniquely fertile soil for democratic and republican institutions was giving way to Old World inequality. Vast class cleavages and a centralized national government much enhanced by the Civil War mobilization were daily effacing the characteristics that Tocqueville had praised in *Democracy in America* and creating those he rued in his *Ancien Regime*.

Explosive economic growth propelled this social transformation. America's rail system, already 35,000 miles strong in 1865, was increased almost fivefold in the succeeding twenty-five years. Railroad freight operations, in turn, created national markets for industrial manufactures. Between 1860 and 1900, pig iron production increased by more than 1,700 percent; soft coal by over 2,000 percent; crude oil by over 9,000 percent. By 1890, American industrial output surpassed that of Britain, France, or Germany. It was an era of technological innovation: Bell's telephone was a product of the 1870s, as was Edison's light bulb. The widespread adoption of electricity as a source of illumination and industrial power made modern manufacturing possible. The

Bessemer process, popularized in the 1870s and 1880s, made the mass production of steel economical for the first time.

But this was also an age of social and organizational innovation. The new industries operated on a scale that defied ownership by small proprietors. In 1870, the United States had perhaps one industrial facility employing as many as 500 workers, but thirty years later more than 1500 such plants had appeared on the landscape. The great American economic empires were being born: the 1870s saw the flowering of the transcontinental railroad systems, the construction of Andrew Carnegie's first steel plant, and the establishment of John D. Rockefeller's oil monopoly.¹ Colossal economic endeavors like these were transforming America into a society of two classes: capitalists and workers.

The new breed of capitalists barely resembled the thrifty and industrious small proprietors of yore. As employers whose income depended on the labor of others, they did not *work* in the traditional sense of the word, and many favored conspicuous consumption over deferred gratification. Nor did their economic practices always meet Adam Smith's description, producing commodities in a rational response to supply and demand. The new capitalists were sharp dealers who often preferred speculating in commodities as opposed to producing them; who created monopolies rather than competing in open markets; who sold suspect financial instruments as opposed to paying their honest debts; and who traded in adulterated goods instead of selling a quality product. They were colloquially known as "robber barons," more reminiscent of feudal lords than the frugal, hardworking and modest bourgeois of Benjamin Franklin's writings. No paragons of civic virtue, these hard men of capital had often acquired their first stakes as profiteers exploiting the Northern war effort, and made their careers on a series of swindles.²

These new entrepreneurs quickly racked up a record of remarkable industrial achievements—and contempt for both democratic government and the rule of law. "What do I care about the law?" crowed Cornelius Vanderbilt. "Hain't I got the power?"³ The railroads, depending on government privileges and land grants for their growth, became synonymous with political corruption. And finding the duly elected authorities unreliable allies, a growing number of companies chose to address their labor problems with an almost studied insult to republican norms: recruiting and deploying private armies and police against their own employees, to bloody effect.

Thus they addressed the other social product of these economic developments, America's new working class. This emergence of a permanent proletariat was the event that Jefferson, Lincoln, and other students of the

Roman republic's fall had so feared. America was no longer the nation in which wage labor was a transitional stage before setting up one's own shop or farm, a point that the depression of 1873–1879 drove home. In past American economic contractions, the unfortunate had generally vacated the cities to wait out the crisis on farms owned by relatives. But now the nation's cities teemed with milling and often desperate unemployed workers seeking public relief.

If this were not bad enough, the very *foreignness* of the American working class further disturbed many native-born Americans who cherished their republican traditions.⁴ Large numbers of the new proletarians were immigrant workers whose commitment to democratic and republican values seemed highly suspect. The Irish and German immigrants of mid-century had seemed dangerous enough to many American eyes. But the rising “New Immigration” drawn by industrialization from corners of southern and eastern Europe that were untouched by either the Reformation or the Enlightenment offered even greater cause for alarm. Not a few Americans shuddered at an influx of foreigners with strange beliefs that were too reactionary (Catholic and Jewish Orthodox) or too radical (socialist and anarchist) to participate productively in America's republican institutions. The political culture of these immigrants' native lands had certainly done nothing to school them in the habits of self-rule, and they were unlikely to learn those habits in America's mills and packinghouses.

Contemporary events conspired to give credence to these fears. The metastasizing urban political machines seemed to confirm Jefferson's thesis that an urban working class “prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition” rather than good politics.⁵ Periodic eruptions of class warfare further heightened concerns. In a notorious 1874 incident, a crowd of unemployed workers (including none other than trade union pioneer Samuel Gompers) was demonstrating for relief in New York's Tompkins Square; the protesters were charged by police, triggering a major riot. In 1875, the violent activities of the Molly Maguires, a secret society of Irish coal miners, ended in ten hangings. Two years later, a nationwide strike rippled across the country's rail lines, bringing riots to several cities that were suppressed only with federal troops. The strikes resulted in over a hundred dead. And in the famous Chicago Haymarket Square riot of 1886, an anarchist rally in support of the eight-hour day erupted in violence (Chicago's German community nourished an active anarchist movement), taking eleven lives and injuring ten times that number.⁶ Those who believed that the new political economy was undermining America's democratic republic did not suffer for lack of evidence.

Labor Reform Movements and the Knights of Labor

American workers crafted two major responses to the challenges of the Gilded Age. On the one hand, they created the national trade unions that would coalesce in the American Federation of Labor (AFL). On the other, they formed a more heterogeneous “reform” tradition that climaxed in the rise and fall of the Knights of Labor.

Scholars have proposed two distinct interpretations of the reform tradition. The older perspective, embraced by John Commons, Selig Perlman, Gerald Grob, and Richard Hofstadter, among others, understood the reform movements that culminated with the Knights mainly as futile efforts to restore the old small property economy and republican norms of America’s past. These movements refused to accept the rise of industry and of classes in America. They spoke in a Jeffersonian and Jacksonian accent of uniting all productive workers, farmers, laborers, and small businessmen alike in a fight against speculators and monopolists—those ersatz aristocrats who secured wealth without labor.

The other view, popularized by many modern, left-leaning labor historians like Leon Fink, Kim Voss, and Paul Buhle held that the Knights and other reform groups constituted a progressive and forward-looking alternative challenging the “business unionism” of the national trade unions.⁷ Where the AFL unions isolated skilled workers in narrow craft divisions, these authors note, reform groups sought broad alliances uniting all workers, skilled and unskilled, together with other classes oppressed by capital. And where the national trade unions generally confined themselves to bargaining with employers, the Knights sought broad social and political reforms.

Despite their opposing normative evaluations, both schools offer sound points, and the two interpretations are not entirely contradictory. But the heated dispute, then and now, has obscured how much the two great labor factions of the late nineteenth century held in common. Both the AFL and the Knights of Labor feared that the new political economy was destroying the sociopolitical conditions and the civic virtues on which American democracy rested. Both wanted, in the words of Knights of Labor activist George McNeill, to “engraft republican principles into our industrial system,”⁸ but they advanced very different ways of doing so.

For the Knights and like-minded reformers, producers’ cooperatives seemed an ideal way to reconcile the new large-scale means of production with a democratic and republican political economy. Cooperative ownership by

producers could reconcile the material benefits of economies of scale with the civic virtues of independent proprietorship. "The aim of the Knights of Labor, properly understood, is to make each man his own employer," declared Terence V. Powderly, the Knights' most important leader. If the cooperative system worked, America could have large-scale industry without classes. Best of all, McNeill observed, "more and more labor-saving machinery will be introduced, the hours of work continually decreased, and the buildings devoted to work so improved that labor shall become a blessing instead of a curse, a pleasure instead of a pain. Instead of, as now, the poor, ignorant, physically and mentally, and sometimes morally, deformed, unskilled worker . . . he will be a man upon whom the honors and duties of civilization can safely rest."⁹

McNeill's comment indicates how much he and his comrades remained concerned with civic virtue, with making workers fit for democratic citizenship. The wage-labor system, McNeill said, "engenders disease, enfeebles the mind, corrupts the morals, and thus propagates misery, vice, and crime" and "makes the employer a despot, and the employee a slave." He took all too seriously the danger that capitalism would degrade the working class intellectually and morally, stripping workers of the talents and predispositions they needed as democratic citizens. But in a remarkable turn of events, McNeill saw American wage workers taking the field to defend the democratic republic from a rebellion by the propertied classes. "These extremes of wealth and poverty are threatening the existence of the government. In the light of these facts, we declare that there is an inevitable and irresistible conflict between the wage-system of labor and the republican system of government—the wage-laborer attempting to save the government, and the capitalist class ignorantly attempting to subvert it."¹⁰

The organ by which McNeill hoped labor would rescue America's democratic republic from capitalist subversion was the Knights of Labor. Established by Uriah Stephens in 1869 as a secret society among tailors, it was intended to uplift and unite workers of every nationality, race, creed, and sex. The group expressly rejected class conflict and strikes, and novices were solemnly instructed that "we mean no conflict with legitimate enterprise, no antagonism to necessary capital." Consequently membership in the Knights was in time opened to all wage earners and even former wage earners, excluding only peddlers of vice, such as gamblers and liquor dealers, and "social parasites" such as lawyers and stockbrokers. Stephens hoped to create a "cooperative commonwealth" uniting all the productive classes through peaceful education and agitation for reform.¹¹

McNeill's heated rhetoric suggested that American democracy confronted

a social and political crisis already much advanced and beyond such mild methods of repair. His essay carefully paralleled the biblical cadences of Patrick Henry's 1775 speech rallying Americans to Revolution.¹² McNeill's reference to "wage slavery" and an "irresistible conflict between the wage-system of labor and the republican system of government" directly recalled William Seward's legendary 1858 "irrepressible conflict" speech and Lincoln's similar "House Divided" remarks the same year. A few years after the slavemasters of the South had raised their hand in rebellion to destroy the republic, and very nearly succeeded, the "capitalist class" was engaged in the same enterprise. The Knights duly made "the *abolishment* of the wage system of labor" their primary goal.

This vocabulary was not chosen lightly. For wage workers of the 1880s slavery was no abstract concept or distant memory, but a familiar evil recently defeated at a dear price in blood and treasure. Moreover, scholars like Fitzhugh had made abundantly clear how ancient Greek slavery, American chattel slavery, and "wage slavery" carried the same *political* implications: whereas one class labors, another thinks, plans, and rules. Lincoln and the Republicans in turn held that a slave aristocracy had steadily accumulated political power, trampling free labor and endangering America's republican institutions.¹³ McNeill and the reformers saw their social struggle as nothing less than saving America's democratic republic from a usurpation like that attempted by the "slave power" a few decades before. And his martial slogans indicated that American democracy could not be preserved and redeemed on the cheap.

But the leadership of the Knights of Labor certainly had no stomach for the kind of industrial warfare that imminently beckoned. Succeeding Stephens in 1879 as "Grand Master Workman" of the Knights was railroad machinist Terence V. Powderly. He would direct the Knights for the next fourteen years, first through dramatic growth and then steep decline. Powderly was fully devoted to educational and cooperative activities and eschewed industrial conflict wherever possible.

Powderly greeted newcomers to the order with the words, "We welcome you to the army of peace, where we bring the producer and the consumer together, render useless the mere handler or jobber, and save the extortion of the speculator, the drone and the non-producer." In an early address to the General Assembly of the Knights, he urged his listeners to "lay siege to the bulwark of oppression" that was "the wage system." But not by industrial action, for as Powderly declaimed: "Today that system has so firm a hold upon us that every attempt at shaking off the fetters, by resorting to a strike, only